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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper suggests how the "service function" of a professor of higher education complements a graduate department of higher education, in which students find an opportunity to think about the nature of higher education in broad perspective, free from the immediate pressures of a job for probably the only time in their professional careers. (Author)

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"Some Thoughts on the Service Role of Departments of Higher Education"

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In thinking about the question of the service function of departments of higher education, it seems to me that it is important first of all to make clear one's perceptions of the nature of graduate education in this area and of what one means by service. Therefore, initially let me very briefly attempt to explicate my thinking on both.

A department of higher education consists, to my thinking, of students and faculty members joined in an effort to understand the nature of the academic enterprise in the United States, its relationship to the general society, and its role in relation to a variety of postsecondary educational activities. For faculty members, a higher education department offers the opportunity to develop their comprehension of the enterprise and to use this understanding in meeting their responsibilities for the guidance of student learning and the evaluation of student achievement. I suggest further that students, in turn, find an opportunity to think about the nature of higher education in a broad perspective, free from the immediate pressures of a job for probably the only time in their professional careers. Three or four years are available in which to examine critically the more significant aspects of the field in which they will work. I am suggesting, therefore, that higher education rather than administration, and an intellectual rather than operational focus, constitute the more appropriate (although by no means exclusive) concerns to be addressed by our departments.

In the sense which I believe it is intended for this discussion, service consists of the activities by means of which students of higher education (which can be both graduate students and faculty members) extend the

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benefits of their expertise beyond the teaching-learning relationship. In terms of the above view of graduate study, clearly I view service as an activity associated primarily with faculty members, although equally clearly it is an activity in which graduate students also can participate. In certain respects I am sure they regularly do this through involvement in internships and in research and other projects associated with departments.

In thinking from such baselines as the preceding, I must admit to a serious reservation regarding whether the service function properly belongs to a department as such. I would say first of all that departments exist primarily to offer graduate degree programs designed for students engaged in or planning careers in higher education, as noted above. I would suggest therefore, that a department must look first to the teaching-learning activity associated with formal courses, seminars and independent study, dissertation guidance, and counseling in the sense of working with students on matters related to their professional aspirations.

In support of this educational responsibility, it is assumed that faculty members will themselves continue to grow professionally, learning more about their own specializations and engaging in at a more advanced level the same kind of systematic study which they expect of students. Traditionally this activity has been viewed in terms of research and conceptual scholarship. However, in line with other professional areas and even many of the disciplines, the activity of research and scholarship has been extended to include other kinds of professional endeavor related to the application of a professor's expertise to problems and issues of general concern in higher education. One might call this, I suppose, applied research.

In the above sense, departments of higher education provide a service to higher education in general and to other facets of the society which have a relationship to or concern about higher education. However, it seems to me that this kind of service is carried out on a personal rather than departmental basis, in the sense that the professor does this as a part of his professional development (for which he may or may not accrue financial profit). One would assume, also, that this kind of expertise would have value to the university in which the department is located and that the faculty member would by the nature of things make available this expertise both to administrative heads and to faculty committees.

The main question, I believe, is whether a department as a department ought to engage, formally at least, in the service function. My response to this question would be to suggest that this function be institutionalized by an activity administratively separated from the department. The device commonly used to this end is a center or institute for higher education which certainly employs the services of departmental staff but does so through formal arrangements which recognize and protect the primary responsibilities for teaching and scholarly development. Precedents exist for this organizational separation which implements a service responsibility and even involves professional staff members whose primary assignment is to the center or institute rather than the department. Examples which come to mind are the centers in Berkeley, Pennsylvania State, and Georgia.

If one were to take the view that a department might appropriately engage in research, study, and applications in higher education or were such a center to be established in conjunction with a department, it would be necessary to distinguisn between its role and that of an office of institutional research which traditionally is viewed in a staff function for administration. To combine both, in my judgment based upon a kind of Parkinsonian view, would be to subordinate

significant study about higher education to the more immediate needs of managerial decision making. In raising this danger -- to my mind inevitability -- I do recognize the need for the more pervasive, long range study essential to institutional planning. One can argue persuasively that such broader view ought to constitute an essential facet of institutional research and that departmental expertise is of unquestioned value for its accomplishment. In defense of my position, I would stress the point that the use of departmental faculty members for this end should depend upon formal arrangements which recognize the primary teaching and scholarly concerns and thus upon administrative initiative rather than some form of ongoing departmental service. Certainly, such contributions might constitute an inherent aspect of a center. Pennsylvania State University, for example, is committed to conducting "studies which have significance for colleges and universities generally but which also have relevance to higher education in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania."

In conclusion, let me reaffirm the two considerations upon which my position rests. One, an operational factor, anticipates that a formal involvement in service to the president or administrative cadre of an institution will inevitably lead to pressures which detract from the primary activities of teaching and professional scholarship. Administrators inevitably have to respond to decision making in an immediate context and they need data and information which assist them to this end. Hopefully they give attention to long range planning and do take advantage of an expertise available from departments of higher education but in a consulting rather than a direct service capacity. The other rests upon the belief that what faculty members do professionally should relate to their role as members of a graduate faculty and thus to the enrichment of their contribution to the teaching-learning activity. This latter consideration, not the value of their expertise to their institutions, must dominate their use of their professional time and effort.

And it follows, I believe, from such considerations that the service function belongs more appropriately with a center or institute designed to serve the needs of higher education as an enterprise. Participation by faculty members and students in such institutes or centers clearly is desirable. But equally clearly it should be arranged in a manner which supports rather than erodes their departmental obligations.